

“Let Them Not Underestimate the Power Inherent in the System...”

The significance of those words from the message dated 20 October 2008 from the Universal House of Justice was strikingly demonstrated in the presentations at the 41 regional conferences by the believers who related their personal experiences in implementing the framework of the Five Year Plan. For many of those in attendance, this portion of the program was the most inspiring segment—both stirring and reassuring—and the friends understood that if they followed the path of these fellow Bahá’ís, their efforts, too, would bear wonderful fruit.

The experience of the regional conferences has had an electrifying and galvanizing impact on thousands upon thousands of believers on all continents. We are pleased to share with you a small sampling of the personal accounts presented at the conferences. They are organized according to the three topics on the first day of the conferences that dealt with the clarification of key concepts: the institute process as the engine of growth, the elements of a healthy pattern of growth, and intensive programs of growth. Without a doubt, these stories, one and all, testify to “the power inherent in the system [we] are putting in place for the propagation of His Faith.”

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I. The Institute Process as the Engine of Growth

United States

A number of the believers who addressed the conferences had been Bahá’ís for only a short time and were the tangible fruits of the institute process and framework for action. For example, a woman addressed the more than 2,200 friends at the regional conference held in **Dallas**, Texas, and recounted how she became an active believer through the institute courses. By the time of the conference, she was already serving on her cluster’s Area Teaching Committee.

A friend of mine heard about the Bahá’í Faith on television. Since she had never heard of it before, she went online and began to research it. She liked what she read and shared it with us at work. We found out that there was a Bahá’í Center in Plano. No one was brave enough to go check it out except me.

I really liked what I heard and was especially impressed by the friendliness and the love of the Bahá’ís that I met. When I began Ruhi Institute Book 1, it was as if I started to fall in love with God all over again. You see, I had given up on God and was very angry with Him. I had had a very bad experience with the church that I belonged to for many years. Book 1 connected my heart to Bahá’u’lláh and to God. I could not get enough of the Writings. I am so happy to have found the Bahá’í Faith not just for myself, but because of my two boys. The greatest gift that I can give my boys is to raise them with Bahá’í teachings and values. I just wish I had found the Faith sooner. My advice to the friends is to please open your mouths and tell people about Bahá’u’lláh. There are many people out there just like me who are waiting to find Him.

Malaysia

The more than 3,300 friends who attended the regional conference held in **Kuala Lumpur** were moved by the story of a 70-year-old man from a small town in Peninsular Malaysia who became inspired to become a tutor through his study of Book 4. He decided to visit a neighboring town 20 kilometers away with the intention of starting a study circle. Because he knew no one in that town, he sat by the side of the road and prayed for aid and assistance. Shortly thereafter, an old acquaintance came along and invited him to his home. Through this chance encounter, the Bahá'í was able to meet other townspeople and to start a study circle with four participants. As he began his service as a tutor, the elderly believer did not forget the words of his own tutor, who had told him that a tutor should take a study circle group all the way through Book 7. His visit to the neighboring town had occurred two years before the conference. By the time he addressed that gathering, the Bahá'í community in the town had grown from 2 to 50 believers in 14 families! The town now has a Local Spiritual Assembly, and he is still serving as a tutor for a Book 6 study circle.

India

The more than 1,500 friends assembled at the **Bangalore** regional conference in India heard brief talks from a number of believers who had participated in a 45-day institute campaign conducted by the training institute for Maharashtra and Goa at a residential facility. After going through the institute courses and carrying out the practices, the participants of the institute campaign returned home as new people. During intensive training, they had acquired the capacities that enabled them now to transform their home cluster.

Two young women, close relatives, related to the friends at the conference how the institute training had affected them and how they were able to contribute to the systematic development of their cluster.

We both participated in the 45-day comprehensive course in Panchgani during July and August 2008. We were trained in Books 1 to 7 including Book 3A and the junior youth spiritual empowerment materials. The study of the books inspired a great spiritual transformation in both of us. We carried out the practices of the service components of the books in the villages around Panchgani, and this experience brought out the joy of service for us. We did all the core activities with our assigned host family. We organized devotional meetings, made home visits for sharing deepening themes, conducted children's classes, initiated a junior youth group, and helped with teaching in the neighborhood of the host family. We could sense the capacity developing in ourselves. Our power of understanding and expression improved. Bahá'u'lláh was confirming our services to His Cause.

After returning home, our enthusiasm did not allow us to rest. We started conducting two children's classes in our village with about 40 children and a junior youth group with 17 junior youths. We began teaching our family members, relatives, and friends, which resulted in 16 declarations. Our joy knew no bounds. We started a study circle for Book 1 in which five of the new believers completed their study and started to hold devotional meetings. We started Book 2, which three friends were able to complete. We are at present doing one study circle of Book 1. We took part in the collective teaching campaign during the first expansion phase of the cycle of activity of our cluster. Now our cluster has an intensive program of growth. We are happy to be active participants of the growth of our cluster.

Australia

A youth from **Sydney**, Australia, reported on how applying the learning and insights gained from an institute course can lead to the transformation of a neighborhood.

We've learned in Sydney that community building doesn't start from another country or city or suburb; it starts at the level of the neighborhood. Our experience began with a home visit that led to a friendship which, in turn, led to a children's class being established.

We had a children's class that was held once a week but something did not seem quite right about it. Upon reflection, we realized that we were not running the classes in the manner outlined by Book 3, so we reflected again to ensure that we were conducting it exactly according to Book 3—following the lesson plans, noting the progress of the children, and working with the parents to make sure that we developed the spiritual qualities of the children together.

As advised in Book 3, we began to track the progress of the children, including what they were memorizing and how their characters were shaping up. We extended that to see how well they could express and understand profound spiritual concepts, which we had underestimated at the start.

After interacting with the parents and encouraging them to work with their children at home, we saw what an influence this had not only on the children but also on their family life. We also started to see a community being built, and the reason for this was that we increased the classes from once a week to daily. As we focused on the quality of the classes, the quantity grew. We saw dramatic improvements in all aspects of community life. For example, at the park where we hold classes, in the beginning it was just us with a guitar and a mat and now there are people walking around, smelling flowers, having picnics, and talking to one another. The classes actually have started to change patterns of community life.

So a home visit led to a friendship, which led to a children's class, then to a junior youth group and to a study circle, and has also led to frequent firesides that run at the same time as the children's classes. What we are seeing is that these children's classes are centers of attraction that have strengthened the roots of the Faith in this community.

II. Elements of a Healthy Pattern of Growth

Mexico

A new believer from **Colima** and his wife were inspired by the study of the sequence of courses. After completing Book 3 and beginning Book 5, they realized the importance of working with children and junior youth. Like all good parents, they worried about their own children. However, because they were nervous about establishing such classes, it was arranged for them to receive support from a group of youth who came from both their own town and other parts of the country. These youth accompanied them as they went door-to-door in their neighborhood, talking to other parents and inviting their children to participate in Bahá'í classes. The wife is now a children's class teacher and the husband a junior youth animator, and they are thankful the youth helped them take the first step. The husband concluded, "It has been exciting for us that other people see the changes in the children."

A fairly new believer from **Ensenada** also spoke about forming a children's class. She became a Bahá'í after starting Book 1 almost two years ago. However, she had many fears about teaching the Faith. "What would the neighbors say?" Finally, she decided to make the commitment to start a children's class. The coordinator for children's classes in her cluster invited her to her own children's class so that she could practice and get used to working with children. After this period of practice, they went together to invite the children from her own neighborhood to join a new class. The new believer said, "We put ourselves in God's hands." Her own children's class now has 12 participants and she adds, "Anyone who does children's classes becomes a child again. It's lots of fun!"

Zambia

When the Zambian community changed its emphasis from teaching in rural areas to teaching in more densely populated townships, it was quickly discovered that urban communities were rich with junior youth. It therefore became imperative that a Bahá'í program for junior youth be established as quickly as possible. The response to the first group started in the Chamboli sector of the **Kitwe** cluster was so overwhelming that it was decided to establish another group in the Dacecourse sector where a core group of four youth resided who could become suitable animators. These four were trained in Book 5 without first going through the earlier books of the sequence in order to expedite the establishment of a junior youth group. They immediately began their service with the assistance of friends from the training institute. The groups became large within the first two weeks, with one attracting 28 participants. With so much interest in the Faith generated by these junior youth groups, it was apparent that the sector had a critical need for additional human resources.

A mobile tutor was sent to the Dacecourse sector to conduct study circles for the four animators to take them through more of the sequence of courses, as well as to conduct study circles for the new believers in the neighborhood where the junior youth groups were functioning. Special attention was given to those persons determined to be capable of becoming tutors or animators. With the crying need particularly for animators, individuals who were not Bahá'ís but were known and who showed an interest in carrying out that service were invited to the Book 5 training. Five of them completed the training and began to conduct junior youth groups, including one especially successful group that has continued for about two years with 25 participants!

A Zambian believer recounting this process told the more than 800 friends present at the **Lusaka** regional conference how junior youth classes evolved into study circles for the sequence of courses.

We sat down again with the institute board and the Auxiliary Board member to discuss a plan to include in study circles the youth turning 15. Truthfully speaking, when junior youth become 15, they long to continue in groups of another type. For instance, when five members from my group graduated, they asked me what was next, since they were now 15. Then with a smile and beaming face, I said that there is another program for you—a study circle. "You will be studying Ruhi Institute materials with non-Bahá'í animators," I said. The next question was, "What do we need to do to become animators?" Then I calmly answered, "You need to undergo training to gain skills and confidence for this act of service." I could see gladness in their faces. We organized training for them and after a few months of serving as animators, they all declared as Bahá'ís. At present the Kitwe cluster has 15 junior youth groups and 18 trained animators.

Canada

One inspiring story recounted to the more than 4,000 attendees at the **Toronto** regional conference came from a young woman of Tamil background who had been active in serving children with special needs at a community center as a volunteer. A Bahá'í recruited her to assist with a junior youth group, which changed her life and led her to the Faith.

The first time I went to the junior youth group, I felt really confused and didn't understand what was going on. I felt more like a junior youth than an animator. After the first lesson from the book *Breezes of Confirmation*, I realized that this program was really different because all the youth programs I had volunteered in earlier did not involve lessons from books. At first I thought that the program would not be as effective because the junior youth would think that books were for school, but then over time I realized that the book gives the program a purpose.

When I first came to the junior youth program, I had the mind-set that the animators made the decisions for the junior youth. When we planned the first service project, I realized it was the opposite because it was the junior youth who decided to clean the park. The junior youth decided and the animators were there just to guide them. I didn't think that this would work, but when it was a success I was pleasantly surprised, and that is when I connected to the program.

When I am co-animating a junior youth group, I find that they are very dynamic and energetic. The enthusiasm and energy of the junior youth are amazing. They hold fewer preconceptions of the world, are able to accept change easily, and are ready to grow given the opportunity. This program provides us with the opportunity to shape the next generation of leaders—people who will know how to make wise decisions that will not only benefit themselves, but also others around them.

They are very excited when it comes to service projects. We made a list of service projects and have done three or four so far: cleaned the park, had a talent show, hosted a community dinner, and performed a play about *Breezes*. They are always thinking of the big picture. They wanted to bike ride to Montreal to raise money for charity, so we had to help localize it and guide them to think at the neighborhood level. They have big hearts.

India

A believer at the **New Delhi** regional conference recounted how his simple acts of service within the framework for action became the spark that ignited his own neighborhood and laid the foundation for a healthy pattern of growth.

I became a Bahá'í in 1998 and for many years I was the only Bahá'í in my area of Delhi. After I completed Book 3, I started a children's class in my neighborhood. Since I am a doctor, I get very busy during the day but the children enjoyed the class so much that they came to my home at 6:00 in the morning. Soon they begged me to hold the class every day! So every morning I held their class.

In 2005 a Book 1 study circle was added and during Delhi's first direct teaching campaign that year, 8 of the 12 youth participating in the study circle accepted the

Faith! All the youth who completed Book 1 started hosting devotional gatherings in their homes and because I was the only experienced Bahá'í, I had to keep calling the Delhi Bahá'í Center, saying, "This week we are having four devotional gatherings. Can you please send some friends?" The following week there were six devotional meetings. Everyone was enjoying having devotional gatherings in their homes.

A few months later a junior youth group started. Three months after that, with the help of the junior youth and members of the study circle, we invited all our family members, neighbors, and friends to a large devotional gathering followed by "Anna's presentation." On that evening 25 guests became Bahá'ís. The same pattern followed during the next expansion phases; each time we had between 25 and 30 new believers.

Now there are 167 believers in my neighborhood, with three children's classes and one junior youth group. Each month we hold between six and ten devotional gatherings. As we live close to the House of Worship, a large number of the believers go to dawn prayers at the Temple every Sunday morning. Many of our youth have participated in the institute campaigns. Since July 2007 we have held our own neighborhood Nineteen Day Feast, and we also contribute regularly to the Fund.

It started with one Bahá'í and now we are a large community.

III. Intensive Programs of Growth

Kazakhstan

The more than 700 friends who participated in the regional conference in **Almaty**, Kazakhstan, were inspired by the following story of two short-term pioneers who served in a "C" cluster—**Kokshetau**, Kazakhstan. After participating in the orientation seminar for resource persons in Almaty, the learning site for the region, the pioneers spent two months helping to develop the cluster so that it could advance toward the stage of launching an intensive program of growth.

After participating in the 18-day resource person orientation in Kok-keinar, Almaty, Kazakhstan, we arrived at Kokshetau where we stayed in the home of one of the friends. We first studied the statistics of the Bahá'í community in Kokshetau received from the secretary of the Local Spiritual Assembly. At that time, only two persons had completed the Ruhi Institute courses. Neither of them was active. Three months before our arrival, one individual had held one study circle and one children's class. We planned visits to the Bahá'ís of Kokshetau and were able to see almost all of them with the help of some active Bahá'ís of the local community.

During the two months of our visit, we carried out the following activities: 28 devotional meetings; 9 study circles with 21 participants; 1 children's class; and 24 firesides with 55 participants, of which 44 were between the ages of 16 and 27. We completed Books 5, 6, and 7 with two friends, who are now able to carry out the framework for action in Kokshetau. We also attended three Nineteen Day Feasts. One result of these activities was 9 declarations! It was clear to us that the people of Kokshetau are receptive to the Faith, particularly the youth.

United States

The **Dallas** regional conference attendees heard the inspiring story of how the **Harris County (Houston)** cluster achieved a healthy pattern of activity in its intensive program of growth through systematic action and reflection. The Harris County cluster covers 4,604 square kilometers and has about 700 Bahá'ís, over 50 study circles, 13 children's classes, and more than 100 friends who have finished Books 6 and 7. The Area Teaching Committee secretary related the progress of the cluster.

We started about a year ago to learn how to learn. We wanted to be students of the Five Year Plan by studying the guidance and constantly acting, reflecting, consulting, and then acting again within the framework of the Plan that the Universal House of Justice has laid out before us. The only way to learn was to go out there and do it. We have a road map so let's go out there and act and see what happens. Make some mistakes, and learn from them for the next cycle.

The first campaign a year ago was actually an invitation campaign to invite friends to core activities and was not directly teaching the Faith. It proved ineffective, and we learned quickly that we needed to find a receptive population and give them "Anna's presentation." So, at the next collective teaching campaign, we found a receptive area and we had over 10 declarations. The next cycle, we had 15 declarations. The last cycle, there were only 4 declarations. This was a learning point. Why only 4 declarations? Well, upon reflection, we had focused only on the collective teaching campaign and did not integrate the other components of the Plan. So the Area Teaching Committee, in consultation with the Auxiliary Board member and cluster institute coordinators, went back to the drawing board and made sure to integrate all the components of the Plan.

As a result, at the reflection gathering on 14 November, the friends were asked to pledge individual efforts such as teaching the Faith in various avenues and not rely solely on the collective teaching campaign to generate seekers. The friends pledged to host devotionals and firesides, seek out receptive souls, conduct children's classes and junior youth groups, start Book 1 with seekers, and finish the sequence of courses in six months.

This current cycle we have had 10 declarations so far! Our goal is 20 so we won't relax!

United Kingdom

One highlight of the regional conference in **London** for the 3,200 friends in attendance from northwest Europe and Greenland was the report on one of the first teaching projects in the region to focus on a particular neighborhood. Following is the story of the believers in the **West Midlands** cluster who carried out a teaching project in Hillfields during the expansion phase of their 12th cycle and the rich learning they gained.

Our experience of growth in the Hillfields neighborhood has been a very modest and simple attempt to implement the concepts of systematic growth, starting with one core activity to which we gradually added the other components of the framework for action. On this journey the confirmations of Bahá'u'lláh, always so timely, have provided the real energy and impetus for progress.

The efforts began with a series of devotional meetings that five seekers attended. This is perhaps the most simple of the core activities, but one which can have a very profound effect. As we sat around the room, we simply shared prayers related to the troubles and cares that burden the soul. Gradually you could see the hearts of the seekers being lifted up as they began to experience a sense of calm and peace, and a new perspective as they began to learn to turn their hearts toward God.

Concepts from Book 1 were gradually introduced to them, and in a short time, three of the initial participants went on to begin the book and declared their faith by the end of it. But heeding the guidance of the House of Justice, we recognized the need to develop the capacity of these three new believers; therefore we agreed to complete the sequence together. That original group has now progressed to Book 6.

During this training process we encouraged these new believers to invite their friends to a series of devotional meetings—the same portal that they themselves had originally come through. Seven people began to attend regularly, and this was a clear indication of how comfortable the *new* believers were in adopting the core activities and how simple it was for them to do this. These seven are now engaged in Book 1, and some have already declared.

But the process of growth gained new energy and momentum when the Area Teaching Committee decided to run two direct teaching projects in the neighborhood. Suddenly a new wave of junior youth and children's classes were established, and I was lucky enough to support these as a homefront pioneer in the neighborhood. The next month we had three additional declarants, who are now attending another Book 1 study circle.

What also naturally grew out of these steps was a simple social development project directed at serving the local community. This took the form of a language class, which, together with children's classes and junior youth groups, now attracts some 30 children and junior youth as regular participants.

This process has been very organic, steadily growing without some grandiose plan. The simple devotional meeting, supported by the training institute process has, in our case, been the seed for 9 declarations, 12 empowered seekers who are serving alongside us, and 30 families from the wider community who are involved in Bahá'í activities.

I would just like to share with you a few learning points that have begun to emerge:

- *Friendship is the foundation.* We have gained a glimpse into the admonitions in the Writings about the need for genuine love and kindness for all who cross our path. Making time for people is the practical expression of our love for others.
- *In every community there are people of capacity.* In every receptive population in a neighborhood there are individuals who are respected, who can influence others, and who can mobilize them.
- *Direct teaching projects are empowering.* They build up courage in those involved in the neighborhood project and establish the presence of the Faith in the locality.
- *Homefront pioneering supports the scheme of growth within the cluster.* Untold blessings can come to a person from pioneering within one's own cluster. Pioneering in a receptive neighborhood and living side by side with the new

believers, creates strong bonds of connection with these souls and helps sustain the process of growth and community building.

- *A holistic vision of engaging the entire family is critical.* The first attempt at establishing junior youth and children's classes proved unsustainable because our vision only embraced the young participants. Subsequently, the parents were given an understanding of the programs and their capacity to positively influence their children. Now participation levels are not only sustained but growing.
- *Seekers themselves are able and willing to shoulder responsibilities.* For our resources to "keep pace" with growth, we are learning to invite and then accompany, right from the outset, the new believers—and even the seekers—to assist us in sustaining the activities. What this requires is a fundamental belief in the capacity of other souls.

United States

The **Oklahoma City** cluster, one of the many to launch at Riḍván 2008, provided an excellent example for the friends at the **Dallas** regional conference of what steps needed to be taken to achieve a successful intensive program of growth.

The Oklahoma City cluster was asked to become an "A" cluster by Riḍván 2008. The cluster took on the challenge without hesitation, and things started happening quickly. We had been happy and comfortable being a "B" cluster until the Auxiliary Board members lit a fire under us. Once we got started, there was no turning back.

The core team had been meeting frequently but the meetings changed; we became more focused and felt that we had a purpose. I can't even remember what we talked about before when we met. We very quickly went from "being" to "doing." Things started moving fast, and in the beginning we didn't know what we were doing or how we were going to get the job done; all we knew was that we had the goal set to become an "A" by Riḍván, and we had to achieve this goal. At first we made a lot of mistakes because we started comparing ourselves to the larger communities that had already become "A" clusters, when really we had to work at our capacity and with our human resources and stop comparing our cluster to others. We had to be realistic in our goals but at the same time we had to learn to stretch out of our comfort zone.

And boy did we stretch! We started planning our first collective teaching project where we formed teaching teams and targeted a neighborhood. We started by looking at our human resources and our target area. Our first collective teaching campaign used an invitational approach. We realized that we made the mistake of falling back on the old methods of knocking on doors and inviting people to an event. It soon became obvious that events were not what drew people in. People were friendly but the response didn't produce the desired outcome. Reluctantly, we realized that we had to do what we had been asked to do: to practice, practice, practice "Anna's presentation" until we were comfortable with it and go out and present it. Our cluster institute coordinator did an awesome job of holding Book 6 refreshers which included constant practice of "Anna's presentation."

It wasn't just "Anna's presentation" that we had to practice. We had to practice having effective devotionals, firesides, children's classes, and home visits to share deepening themes ahead of the teaching campaigns. We also had firesides set up throughout the week, and they were held close to the areas where we were teaching.

The more we taught, the more we realized an important part of teaching is the debriefing time. The teaching teams came together after teaching and talked about lessons learned. We analyzed the teams' successes and misfires, refined and redefined methods. Some methods were retained while other methods were discarded quickly. We had to learn to be flexible and strategies were modified when conditions warranted it.

After the first collective teaching project, we started planning more teaching projects with more and more participants. We began with 10 individuals, which quickly increased as we began to experience success, and at times we had as many as 35. The young adults, youth, and junior youth were key elements. On the weekends you might expect the youth to be out hanging with their friends, but they were right there with the teams, and they were often the ones doing "Anna's presentation." Persian friends with limited capacity to make the presentation in English became tremendous assets by being the ones who stood there and prayed silently while the message was being delivered. As the teaching went on, people started getting over their fears and became excited to come to the teaching projects. Once they went out and saw the response, they were eager to go out again.

Everyone started finding their own role in the plan. Friends were bringing food, offering their homes for firesides and devotionals, praying for the success of the cluster, and more people started engaging in the Ruhi Institute books. The participation of non-Bahá'ís in the study circles also increased, which resulted in declarations. As our human resources grew, we had to refine our approach even more.

The core team realized that reflection gatherings were our lifeline to replenish our spirits, our enthusiasm, and the human resources. They're also an opportunity to keep the cluster up to date on the goals, the successes, the learning, and upcoming plans.

Another component that is key to the success of an intensive program of growth is prayer. We realized that there is no such thing as praying too much. We would pray before we went teaching, when we returned, and around neighborhoods. Individuals who stayed back at the homes that were used as gathering points would pray while others went out and taught.

We had several teaching campaigns but had only two declarations. However, carrying out several collective teaching campaigns while we were a "B" cluster is what led us to become an "A" cluster. Never think that it is too late or too early to launch a collective teaching campaign. The campaigns caused the cluster to experience the learning, the emotions, the joy, the challenges, and the practice that led us to launch our intensive program of growth as an "A" cluster in which we had 16 declarations! Our cluster is about to launch its third cycle, and I can tell you that we are still learning, still making mistakes, and still feel challenged at times.